Stranger White

Over the fallen snow she pauses,
tears a hole the size of her body,
mining purchase.
This mother is not pure,
grunting and cuffing her cubs
into a side chamber;
her markings of oily tan
show beneath the terrible haunches.
She weighs more than three hundred pounds
so does not fear the hunters when they appear
vertical, incredible,
their claws aimed at her ruffled neck.
When one jolts backward, the air freezes to solid lead,
burrows in and warms her heart.
Her gaze is thrown open
to all the spectrums
she could not glimpse before.
Stumbling, cross-eyed,
her cubs spinning off into white,
a sudden tumor in her throat,
pine needles in her shoulder; she works
the frantic snow and ice—tires spitting hot gravel.
Like the bodies of caribou, and musk oxen
that occur here and there,
in these dark waters
her skeleton will grow a stranger white:
a death more secret
than other apocalypses still to come.
Was it in the hunt?
Did her children cry and worry up under her belly,
into the fourth chamber of her heart?
Was there smoke hung with propane
and blazing fat?
Did the scope close down
and see her indistinguishable
from any other mother:
a wild, wet lump struggling
with an intolerable weight ?
Whose struggle is it?

What clarity the snow mother must have
in her final vision,
the minor whites shunted aside,

her black muzzle bursting through our lens
like a land mine
through an innocent leg.
What clarity we could share with every burning beast
in our mouths, when we crack
and suck their bones.
How devious the tundra
that opens to cover its own children
and laugh at us,
forever mesmerized by a body
that can never come apart.

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